

## **The Longest Night** by **raerae77**

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**Summary:** When Steve agreed to watch the little rugrats while El, his ex, and the rest of the grown ups went to save the world again, he didn't anticipate a macho showdown with Hawkins High's new alpha. Thanks to a little feminine intervention the night doesn't stop at the Byers household. Set in an isolated cabin in the woods, tensions run high as things heat up. \*\*Rated MA in later chapters

# 1. Chapter 1

Steve stood resolute with his hands on his hips. A gentle breeze whipped the tips of his hair across his forehead. It itched, but he wasn't about to thwart his masculinity by fondling his precious locks of golden-brown hair.

"I already told you," he said through his teeth, "she isn't here."

Billy came forward. His eyes never left Steve but they swam with defiance. It had been a long time since Steve had had a good old fashioned show-down with another man. Since his "King Steve" reputation had begun to precede him at Hawkins High most of the guys backed off entirely or clung to his hips like mouth-breathing parasites. But this guy was different.

Steve didn't know much about Billy but had to admit... he was curious. He came from California, and even if the rumor mill hadn't disclosed that one when he first arrived, his hair and style gave that away. He wore his sandy locks in a grungy mullet that somehow looked equal parts bad-ass and natural. It didn't look like he spent an hour on it every morning... unlike Steve.

Billy took a long drag on the cigarette pressed between his lips. The tip grew red and sizzled in the silence that hung in the air between them. When he finally plucked it out of his mouth he let the swirling puffs of smoke out inches away from the king.

"Then tell me, pretty boy... Who the fuck is that?"

In spite of himself, Steve pried his eyes away and cast a wary glance towards the house.

All four shitheads were present and accounted for in that split second before they dove beneath the window sill in fear. Including Billy's little sister; the reason he had tracked them down at the Byers house.

"Shit," Steve fumbled for a good excuse. Some sort of backstory, or any way for him to play that redhead off as being anyone in the world except Maxine.

Before he could think of anything clever enough to fly there were two strong hands gripping him by the collar of his shirt, bringing his eyes back to Billy's.

Billy clacked his teeth together inches away from his nose, sending tendrils of fear down the back of Steve's neck. Fear. He felt frozen under the man's gaze. His mind reeled under the conflict; could he outrun the new kid? He probably could, but he would be seen as a coward. Steve was no coward. But could he fight him off? They were very close to the same size but he had squared off against Billy on the basketball court several times now and he had a sturdier stance. He could tell he had done this before, countless times undoubtedly, and almost all of Steve's fighting experience, well... couldn't be explained.

"Why are you stowing my baby sister away in a stranger's house, King Steve?" Billy murmured. His tobacco-scented breath hit his jaw hot and heavy.

Steve gulped. "It's not what it looks like."

"Which is exactly what a pervert would say, don't you think?"

Time turned to molasses.

Steve watched in horror as Billy's lips curled up and he set his jaw. One hand, his right, released the collar of his shirt and whipped backwards with his fingers curled into a fist. An animalistic snarl slipped through his teeth as he brought his fist rocketing towards Steve's jaw. He tried to lean back, out of the way, but his eyes were seeing the impact before his brain had time to process. A blinding flash of pain exploded in his right temple and everything went quiet except for a gentle buzzing sound.

"*Billy!*" a shriek came from somewhere in the distance.

Steve twisted on the ground. He had to get back to the house before this monster got to the kids; the kids he was responsible for protecting.

A woman appeared. She was a swirling image of curves and hair—long, wavy black locks that flew around her as she moved. She leapt

towards Billy and yanked him backwards. Steve could hear her screaming and the vague, muted sounds of a struggle. He rolled over onto his stomach and tried to army-crawl towards the house. He needed to make sure the kids were okay.

Hopefully they were smart enough to hide.

"Your probation..." the woman was saying over and over while Billy seemed to be struggling to get her off of him. "You can't... they'll send you back... would you just, *think*, damn it!"

"Back off, Darla!" Billy snarled.

Steve managed to pull himself to his feet and make it to the front door of the Byers household.

A nagging impulse in the back of his head urged him to keep an eye on Billy because another sucker punch felt imminent, but he actively disregarded it. He had to get inside first. Barricade the door. Poor Max... He had only met this girl tonight and all he really knew about her, from what Dustin had told him throughout the course of the night, was that she was awesome, played video games, was wildly accepting of their party's strange history, and again, she was awesome. Even from what he had seen she didn't deserve to be related to such a shitty guy. No one did.

Then, from behind in the most sickening, ominous tone...

"Whoa, where do you think you're going, cowboy?"

A meaty hand clasped around his head of hair and pulled up to his feet. Steve groaned automatically as his follicles were ripped from his head, and he grabbed hold of the hand to keep him from getting a bald spot.

"Billy!" the woman was still screaming but she was farther away now.

Steve was spun around and before he could let his vision catch up with the sudden pull he felt two punches to the gut and it might as well have been a bomb detonating. He doubled over, struggling for breath, and a dirty boot met him in the side of the face.

Again he was on his back.

Billy loomed above, upside down and grinning in front of the full moon.

"I'm going to give you one last chance to hand over my baby sis, King Stevie. Then you can thank me for leaving you with most of your teeth."

Steve's vision swam. A stale, metal taste filled his mouth and the scent grew potent under his nose. The thought of handing over anyone or anything to this cretin was sickening.

"Eat... shit," he sputtered.

Billy's grin soured. "Why you little—"

"Max, what are you doing?!"

"*Max!*"

"Get back here!"

"Kid, *watch out*—!"

The last thing Steve saw before everything went dark was the little redheaded girl leaping over his body wielding his very own nail-encrusted baseball bat.

...

Pain. It radiated from the crown of his head, down the length of his spine, branching out to the tips of his limbs, and wallowed in the base of his stomach. Steve groaned and struggled to pry his eyes open. One was swollen shut, but the other eventually gave in. His whole face stung with open wounds going untreated but when he tried to inspect the damage he found his arms to be restrained behind him

"Wuss... go... on..." the back of his throat felt scraped with each incoherent syllable.

A gentle force shook his body to the right and he fell to the side. The cool, hard side of Billy's '79 Camaro kept him from toppling over but he still winced from the impact. He was sitting in the back squished between a warm body and the arching ceiling of the tiny car. He was way too tall for this to be comfortable.

"Be quiet." The woman's voice floated back from the driver's seat. He could only see the back of her head from where he sat, her long hair coiled over her right shoulder. She was white-knuckling the wheel as they flew through the trees getting further and further out of Hawkins, Indiana.

The car rolled and jumped at each bump in the road and Steve could feel the mixture of anxiety and bile rising up to his mouth.

"Sl... Slow down!" he tried to scream but his mouth was so swollen it was hard to move. It felt like he had been stuck outside in a snowstorm for hours and his skin was so frozen his brain had lost most of its ability to control it.

The woman didn't respond. Her hand reached forward and cranked a dial on the dash board. The car was filled with bass—Steve couldn't make out the song because everything was shaking and pounding in his head and he could barely differentiate his own pulse from the music.

Trees whipped by at an alarming rate. The road was dark, incredibly uneven, and tightly wound. Nothing looked familiar. They were outside of Hawkins without question, but how far? How long had he been out? And who...

Steve's head lolled to the left as the car took a sharp right without slowing down and got a mouth full of greasy, curly hair.

Billy's mullet.

Steve's good eye widened in reflex and he shot back towards the right side of the car like the sight had electrocuted him. Billy was slumped against the window, his steady breathing creating thick patches of fog on the glass. He was asleep. Whether that was by choice or by force... Steve had no idea.

His attention turned back to the woman in the driver's seat. She had relaxed behind the wheel. She now had her elbow propped on the window resting her head, the other lazily slung over the wheel. The road was so overgrown that Steve could barely follow it but she tore through the underbrush like she knew every twist like the back of her hand.

"Who are you?"

No answer.

"Where are we going?"

She stared straight ahead like she hadn't even heard him—which might have been the case, given the music. It was beginning to sound familiar. The Smiths.

*"End of the pier, end of the bay  
You tug my arm and say,  
Give in to lust, give up to lust,  
Oh heaven knows we'll soon be dust..."*

Steve looked around wildly. The realization hit him all at once like a runaway train and he felt the fear of Jesus quickening his blood.

"Where are the kids?" he screamed, and kicked the front seat to get her attention.

The woman twitched and turned down the music ever so slightly.

"I thought I told you to be quiet."

"Where's Dustin? Max? The others..."

"They're fine. You need to calm down."

"CALM DOWN?" Steve exclaimed. For the first time since his waking he felt restless and wanted to continue the fight he'd helped start. "You kidnap me and tie me up and leave four kids alone and abandoned while... while they...with everything going on with... but you need ME to say calm? STOP. THE DAMN. CAR."

He felt the car slow down and for a moment felt relief. She was complying. He could still get back to the kids... who knows what fresh hell they got themselves into without him to act as the voice of reason.

But the car didn't stop. The woman did throw her head back to shoot him a brief, dumbfounded glare.

"You're not tied up, dumbass."

Steve blinked.

"You're sitting on your hands."

Steve tried wriggling his fingers. His hands were asleep, but he could feel them behind him and he pulled his shoulders together to free them. The back seat was cramped with two fully grown men shoved back there, but he was, in fact, unbound. He looked down at his hands sheepishly and began shaking them trying to put some life back into those digits.

"And the kids are fine. While you two boneheads were napping I dropped them off at a pumpkin farm close to their house. That old guy Earl said he'd keep an eye on them and his wife was making cocoa when I left."

Steve's eyebrows shot up.

"Oh no... You don't understand, those kids get into some severely messed up shit when you leave them unattended. We have to go back. They're going to get themselves killed."

"I don't know, their plan seemed pretty flawless..."

"They told you what they were doing?!"

The woman shot him another look but this time she was smirking. "They didn't have to. I played Dungeons and Dragons when I was a kid, too."

Steve fell back against the seat, defeated. "They're all dead," he whimpered to himself. "And Nancy's going to beat whatever part of



me isn't beaten until I'm dead too."

"Oh please. Little Miss Drama Queen couldn't give you a black eye if you were tied to a pole at her eye level and you gave her three tries."

Steve's eyes slid her way. "You underestimate her."

"Whatever. Now *be quiet*. You're bumming me out."

Steve scoffed. His mind reeled with horrible images... There was poor Dustin lying crumpled up like a human paper ball in a field of pumpkins... Nancy finding her little brother dismembered and scattered across various dimensions or whatever the hell it was, wherever the hell it was, that they were up against...

But there was no way to explain what was happening, not to this... stranger. Outsiders didn't understand. All he could do was hope that the kids had enough sense to stay alive.

Billy stirred in his sleep causing Steve to flinch. He was still sore and aching but if he attacked first he was sure he could beat Billy this time. At the very least, he could grab his arms and keep him down. The cramped car didn't feel like the best battleground for a full on throw down.

Without warning the car came to a halt and both boys were thrown forwards, meeting the front seat face-first. Billy fell into the headrest with his face smeared into the sticky leather seat while Steve rubbed his jaw angrily.

The woman threw the car in park and finally turned around enough to meet Steve's eyes. There was a burning familiarity behind those eyes, but he couldn't put his finger on it.

She bared her teeth. "We're here."

## 2. Chapter 2

The woman got out and popped her seat forward. Billy was, astoundingly, still out of it so Steve was left to his own devices while she tried to wriggle him free.

He squeezed himself out of the passenger's side and used the car for support as he stood, stretched, and surveyed his surroundings. They were parked in front of a cabin in a small space that could barely be described as a 'clearing'. Trees and shrubs ran right up to the side walls of the tiny bungalow and it didn't look like the place had been tended to in years. Possibly decades.

Steve's mind was flooded with inquiry. How far out of town were they? Why was he taken here? Who's cabin was this and was he about to get iced? Why not restrain him if she was planning on killing him... wouldn't she be worried about him trying to fight her off or run?

"Hey, mop head!"

He spun around and saw the woman struggling with Billy slung over her shoulders. Her knees were doubled under his weight as she kicked the car door closed. "Are you gonna give me a hand or just stand there?"

Steve opened his mouth to respond but shook his head, confused and partially offended.

"Mop head?"

Nevertheless he ran to her side, unsure of why he chose to help her but feeling like he was supposed to anyways. He slipped a hand around Billy's waist and nearly gasped. His denim jacket road up with his arms over their shoulders and the patch of skin revealed was smooth to the touch, silky even, but taut. Steve tried to carry most of Billy's weight while his mysterious captor straightened and muttered a tight, "thanks".

Once inside, she turned on a light switch and Steve struggled to

adjust to the dim campfire-coloured lighting.

There was a single bulb in the center of the room that cast a series of ominous shadows on the walls, but otherwise the inside looked nothing like how he imagined. He had pictured every inch covered in cobwebs and mountains of dust, but instead he found the place... lived in.

There was a couch and two arm chairs facing one another with a tiny, oval coffee table between them which held a dog-eared paperback and an empty coffee mug. The kitchen was tidy except for a small pile of dishes in the sink—nothing rancid, just untended to. A large queen-size bed with a weathered purple comforter and two white pillows was somewhat made in the opposite corner. There was a shelf of board games collected through the years, a tiny stack of VHS tapes with no television in sight, a half-set of Encyclopaedias, and various other knickknacks that made Steve wonder...

"Do you live here?"

She answered with an indifferent 'mhmm' and pointed to one of the couches. "You can set him down there. He should come out of it soon enough... Water?"

Steve obediently slithered out from under Billy's arm, setting him down gently on the sofa. She returned after a moment with a damp rag which she folded and placed atop his forehead. He gave another moan but his eyes still hadn't fluttered open. Something was wrong. However long ago it was, he was just kicking Steve's ass... why was he so out of it?

"What happened to him?" Steve questioned.

"Jesus, you're full of questions."

"Maybe I wouldn't be if some of them were answered."

She heaved a sigh but gave in. "Fine. Over here, then."

Once again, he did as he was told. Steve followed the woman to the bedroom area of the cottage, where she provided him a sealed bottle of water and a cool dishtowel filled with ice cubes for his eye. He

accepted both quietly and plunked down on the foot of her bed while she curled her legs beneath her by the pillows.

"His sister drugged him," she explained curtly. "I don't know with what, but after those kids handed his ass to him on a silver platter she had a syringe and she stabbed him in the neck. He fell like a sack of rocks and one of the kids—the one with the curly hair and a bit of a lisp—"

"Dustin," Steve interrupted, his brow furrowed. "His name is Dustin."

"Fine. *Dustin* told me not to worry and that he'd wake up in a few hours."

Steve nodded. It wasn't like he needed an explanation as to why a bunch of preteens were running around with syringes—the last he saw of the Byers' house they were littered everywhere like candy bar wrappings on November first.

He cast a wary glance over to Billy who was starting to move his legs more. It wouldn't be long until he was back on his feet, fists swinging.

The woman gave him a look. "Out of questions already?"

"No," Steve brought his attention back to her. He had minutes, at most, to find out everything. "Who are you?"

"Seriously?"

He took a sip of water, forcing himself to maintain eye contact. Her eyes had narrowed with disgust and scorn. He immediately regretted asking, but he had a right to know. She did technically kidnap him, after all.

"We were in the same class every year until junior high."

It was Steve's turn to narrow his eyes. "I don't think so."

She leaned forward and cracked her knuckles. "Let me jog your memory. In the first grade you and your friends used to chase me and my friends around the playground. Sometimes you threw things at us, like pebbles, dirt clumps, or snowballs... but one day... you found a

frog."

Steve raced to find the memory she was talking about.

"Jiminy," he snapped his fingers. "We called him Jiminy. Todd Posey ended up taking him home and kept him as a pet."

The woman nodded. "Yes. Do you remember how the tale of Todd and his Frog turned out?"

Steve winced. It was one of those playground urban legends that *everybody* heard about by the next recess—even the older kids. Todd had been running around trying to scare the girls with the slimy amphibian and most of them screamed and ran away but there had been one girl who didn't run, a girl who thought Jiminy was cool and wanted to hold him. Todd tried to bribe her and said she'd have to give him a kiss to have a turn with his frog, to which the girl defiantly proclaimed she'd rather kiss the frog than him, and then proceeded to do just that.

His eyes cleared with recognition. "Darla... Darla Hastings!"

She nodded once. "Tis I."

"I thought you moved away after fifth grade?"

"I did, for a couple years. My Parents split up, mom moved to California to live with her sister and my cousins, and she wanted me to go with her. It was fine at first but... well long story short, that arrangement didn't exactly work out... Came back as a Junior to live with my dad but you know how it goes. New family, new set of kids... There wasn't exactly room for me there so he ended up fixing this place up for me. He used to use it with his buddies on weekend hunting trips but he hasn't been out since he started wearing a suit to work and coaching his step son's little league team every Tuesday and Saturday."

"California?" Steve's brows shot up again. "Is that how you..."

Darla shook her head, sending her dark waves spiralling over her shoulders. "No. I only met Billy here in in Hawkins. What can I say... we connected."

Steve rolled his eyes so far back in his head that it physically hurt.  
"Right."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He chose to ignore the prompt and instead leaned forward, suddenly fascinated with the label on the bottle of water.

"How did I not know you were back?"

"Well, we don't exactly run in the same social circle."

"Yeah, but still."

She exhaled loudly through her nose. "I guess 'King Steve' was too busy ruling his empire to notice the rumblings of the peasant world then."

The sudden urge to punch the box spring mattress welled within him. "Alright, I'm sorry for not remembering you right away but cut the attitude. I'm not going to apologize for being popular. It's not like I asked for it, I just... you grow up, things happen, and people fall into their archetypes, okay? That's high school. That's just how it works."

"It actually doesn't have to work like that. It only 'works like that' if you make it."

"Whatever. Don't blame me because you wound up on the lower end of the social food chain, okay? I didn't do that. I've never seen you at one of the games, or at any parties and let me guess, you're not part of any clubs or anything are you?"

Darla looked at him for what felt like an eternity before the ghost of a smile cracked on her lips.

"Wait... do you think I'm jealous of you? Because of your 'popularity'?"

He opened his mouth to respond but held back.

She laughed. "Now *that's* sad."

"Excuse me?"

Darla calmed down and met his gaze steadily. She leaned forward and crawled to the end of the bed slowly, every move looking calculated like a tigress on the hunt. Her gazelle sat still, oddly terrified to look away. He didn't want to miss the attack. She paused merely inches away from his face and Steve's pulse quickened. It was too reminiscent of his most recent confrontation which didn't exactly go too well.

"Let me make one thing perfectly clear. I have no regrets about my 'social standing' or whatever you want to call it."

His breath caught in his throat. "Then what do you regret?"

As if in response, Billy groaned from across the room and lifted his hand to his face, pinching the bridge of his nose. He coughed and leaned forward with his head between his knees, the cold rag falling to the floor.

The tension dissipated almost as quickly as it appeared, replaced with a new sense of urgency.

Steve spun back to Darla. "Why did you bring me here?"

Darla pushed herself off the bed and past Steve without a glance.

"I brought you both here because you have some things to work out, and fighting about it in front of kids in a stranger's front yard is not the place to be doing it."

She retrieved a second bottle of water from the tiny fridge in the kitchen and knelt down in front of Billy. She ran her fingers through his hair and whispered something to him as his eyes began to flutter. Her gaze drifted over her shoulder to Steve—still perched on the foot of her bed with hesitation and confusion evident on his face.

She offered him a sly smile. "Plus... I wanted to have a little fun."

### 3. Chapter 3

For the second time that night, Steve felt like he was helplessly watching from the sidelines as Billy and Darla conversed.

Billy's eyes never left Steve. Now that he was fully alert they untrustingly bore into him like he was a ghost in a scary movie; as if he blinked or looked away, even for a second, Steve would vanish and pop up just in time to strike.

"Would you just trust me on this?" Darla hissed in his ear. "You need to work this shit out."

"No. We need to fight this shit out."

"And what's that going to prove?"

Billy's tongue slipped out through his smirk, wriggling wildly, and Steve couldn't tell if Billy was aware of it or of it was some sort of tick.

"If he's really hot shit like everyone thinks he is, then he has nothing to worry about."

Steve couldn't handle it anymore. He was poised still as a statue, refusing to squirm under Billy's watch but his blood was boiling and he wouldn't let himself continue to be gawked at like a piece of meat.

"I'm not scared of you," he spat. "You might intimidate some people with that chin-up, chest-out, macho crap but I see right through you."

Billy was on his feet in a second. He shook his arms out of his denim jacket, puffing his chest out to reveal the tanned muscles beneath his mostly-undone red shirt. Steve met him in the middle of the room. He was careful to plant his feet this time before placing his hands on his hips.

"Is that so?" Billy taunted. "Tell me then, King Stevie. What do you think you're seeing?"

"I don't think you want to know, man."



"No, please. Enlighten me with your great wisdom."

Steve cleared his throat. His heart pounded in his chest like he could already feel the man punching him in the throat so hard he swallowed his own molars but he couldn't back down just yet. They hadn't even started.

"Fine, you want to know what I see when I look at you? I see a sad, frightened little boy. You move to a new town, a small town where everyone knows everyone—"

"—With some exceptions," Darla muttered darkly from the couch. She folded her arms while her gaze darted back and forth between the boys quickly.

Steve continued as though he hadn't heard her. "You know there's no room for secrets here. You had a split second to define yourself and you chose the mysterious bad-boy rebel without a cause, thinking you'd terrify your way to the top when everyone around you was quick to smack you right back down. They filled you in on all the rumors about me, talked me up and then you realized since there was already one alpha at Hawkins High, the only way for you to stay at the top was to dethrone me. Am I right so far?"

Billy chuckled but the smile didn't reach his eyes.

Steve inched forwards. "So you practiced. Started lifting more, mingled through the upperclassmen, tried to discreetly learn more about me. You became obsessed. You couldn't just walk up to me in the halls and wail on me with no reason, oh no... because you know the kids at school are my friends and they'd be far quicker to defend me than you no matter how long you can do a keg stand for, or how well you play ball. You had to wait for the right moment. And that's the only reason why you're not whipping me right now."

Billy wasn't chuckling anymore. His mouth was frozen open mid-laugh but there was no sound, no breath. His eyes had narrowed into menacing slits. As Steve approached him, his voice dropped to a whisper.

"You need witnesses; a crowd of people who can attest that I

provoked you. You won't jump me now because there's no one here to tell your side of the story."

Darla scoffed. "What the hell am I? A sack of potatoes?"

Again, she went ignored.

Steve continued, "Because what you don't want the other kids at school to think... what you don't want *me* to think, or Darla, or even yourself... is that you're really just tired of being scared all the time. Scared of the new town... scared of not being able to maintain this image you're so desperately clinging to... and if you ask me, you're so scared of yourself that the thought of anyone knowing you really are under all this bravado... that might be a fate worse than death for you."

"Wow." Billy's voice was low and gravelly. His grin had slipped down his face and the tip of his tongue was propped between the rows of his teeth. He stepped forward without dropping his chin until the boys stood nose-to-nose, barely three inches apart. "You think you've got me all figured out, don't you, Steve?"

The corners of Steve's lips twitched upwards. "You didn't call me King."

"Yeah," Billy's grin reappeared in full force. "Because that's a title which, like most things in your life... you don't deserve."

He planted a hand on Steve's shoulder while the other one ploughed into his stomach in less than a second. He doubled over, fighting for air, but Billy wasn't about to take it easy on him just yet. He delivered a second blow to the gut and when Steve lost his balance, he popped him in the jaw and sent the boy flying.

Billy laughed, loud and proud. "That's the difference between you and me, Stevie boy! I don't talk trash, I just burn it."

Steve coughed and sputtered for air but he refused to stay down. As Billy came towards him again he kicked his legs out with all the energy he had and brought the blonde down to his level. He was quick to react and crawled on top of him, managing one solid punch

to the nose that brought a trickling stream of blood from the right nostril before Billy throttled him off of him with his hips.

Steve rolled to the side and kept going, trying to put as much distance between them before he could stop.

Billy was practically giddy as he got to his feet. "Powerful, huh?" he mused, giving himself two light punches on either side of his hip bone. "You really caught some air, there."

"You too," Steve nodded and kicked him in the abdomen. Billy fell backwards into one of the armchairs, which slid back from the momentum.

Steve braced himself and got into "fighting stance" while Billy leapt to his feet but suddenly the brunette was between them both with her hands calmly outstretched.

"Okay, we're going to stop this before you two break everything I own. Gentle reminder that you both took a beating tonight, some of which was doled out by twelve-year-olds, so you're not going to resolve anything this way."

Billy glowered at her. "Stay out of this, Darla."

Steve frowned at her as well. "For the record, those kids are scrappy as hell."

Darla rolls her eyes. "Jesus. Sit your asses down, both of you."

Neither made a move.

"NOW!"

She made shooing motions with her hands and started lightly swatting at the boys until they gave in and shuffled to the kitchen. There was a small, wooden square table that was barely big enough for four acting as a dining room table. It sat wedged in the corner of the kitchen area but Darla pulled it out to the center of the room and removed stacks of old newspapers, magazines, and clothing until the surface was cleared. The boys sat down opposite each other under the single dangling lightbulb. They each crossed their arms stubbornly

while the woman turned her back and started rummaging around through the cupboards.

Billy narrowed his eyes and cracked his knuckles threateningly.

Steve responded with a condescending eye-roll and ran a hand through his perfectly coifed hair.

"Alright, here's the game." Darla slammed two bottles of vodka on the table; one full and sealed, the other half-emptied. "I know better than to ask you to talk about your feelings, but fighting is only going to make this worse between you two, and this way at least there's a chance no one will remember tonight if it doesn't go as planned."

She retrieved three shot-glasses and set one down in front of each party member while she took her own seat.

Billy reached for the opened bottle and began pouring the shots like this was an everyday occurrence while Steve tried to not cringe. He barely drank at parties anymore and even when he did, he normally stuck to beer. The few times he had attempted something stronger were either removed from his memory or didn't exactly paint a pretty picture.

Unfortunately, the blonde dude across from him seemed to pick up on his apprehension.

"Scared, Harrington?"

Steve swallowed hard and set his jaw. "You wish."

Billy snickered quietly to himself while he slid the glasses, topped to the brim, in front of each member at the table. "You're not going to make us play one of your dumb sleepover games are you, Dar? Because *truthfully* I don't think Steve's a particularly *daring* individual."

Darla shot him a glare. "No. Actually, we're going to play one of *your* dumb sleepover games." Her hand disappeared beneath the table and when it resurfaced there was an aged deck of cards cradled in her hands. "Five-card poker."

The men nodded; the relief between them palpable.

She tossed the deck to Steve and instructed him to deal.

"What's the buy in?" Billy was reaching for his wallet but Darla snatched it and tossed it to the other end of the room. "What the hell!"

"Your money's no good in this game."

Billy groaned. "Oh, cut the crap. No one plays poker just for fun."

"Well we're not playing just for fun. We're playing for shots."

"For once, I agree with Big Blondie," Steve muttered as he shuffled the cards and started to deal out their hands. "I think cash is the way to go."

"Too bad," Darla huffed. "You guys already want to kill each other, I'm not adding financial instability into that mess. We'll play for drinks to start and if the need arises, there are tons of other things we can bet that don't involve your singles."

"Oh, really?" Billy wriggled his eyebrows over the table and picked up his shot glass. He held it high over the center of the table and slammed his fist in a non-threatening manner. "Whaddya say, Stevie? Up for a gamble?"

Darla gathered her hair in her hands and wrapped the dark, tangled locks in a loose bun behind her head. Once she was ready to get down to business she lifted her glass over the bottle and clinked it against Billy's.

Steve inhaled slowly and weighed his options. They couldn't force him to stay here, could they? He would have a hell of a time trying to find his way back to town in the woods at this hour, but what would they do to stop him? Throw rocks at him or tie him to the radiator? Neither seemed very likely.

He knew he should walk away now. While he had the chance. If this were a scary movie, this is when the audience would be shaking their heads and stuffing their faces full of salty popcorn and turning to

their friends saying something like *what a maroon*.

Still, he dropped what remained of the deck in the center of the table and clinked glasses with the others.

"Let's do it."

They dropped their shots on the table in unison and tilted their heads back, setting fire to the back of their throats. The night had officially commenced.

## 4. Chapter 4

"I gotta hand it to you boys," Darla murmured as she unfurled her cards. "It's been almost half an hour and no one's tried to turn this into a game of strip poker."

Steve's eyes flitted over his hand in a nervous fashion. "What can I say," he muttered absently, "I guess we're all gentlemen here. I'm raising."

A cloud of smoke drifted out of Billy's lips while he studied the fidgety male across the table. "Raising what, Harrington? We're not playing for cash. Or clothing. *Yet.*"

He bobbed his head in thought. "Three shots," he announced matter-of-factly. "Three. Back to back. No chasers."

Darla put her cards down and knocked back her shot. "I'm out. Hard pass. Leave me alone. Pour me another, but leave me alone. Time out. I'll be back." She got to her feet and stretched until two little cracks emanated from somewhere on her body. She then made her way towards the opposite end of the house, taking very conscientious steps along the way, to the bathroom leaving the boys unsupervised.

As if on cue, both of them leaned back in their seats and met each other's gaze steadily.

The first round had been awkward to say the least. They squabbled over rules and wild cards until the trio reached a truce, everyone took their second shot, and they started over. Darla had won one hand so far, as had Billy, but Steve was on a streak. He had managed to come out on top for the last three rounds and the game's dynamic was shifting.

"Scared, Hargrove?" he taunted.

Billy responded with a low, throaty chuckle. He exhaled a long tendril of smoke and put out his cigarette in the old ash tray Darla had put out.

"You think you're hot shit, Harrison?"

The ghost of a smirk played with the corners of Steve's lips. He didn't bother to correct him. He wasn't going to give him what he wanted.

"I think you have two options, man. Take the bet and brace your liver, or fold. But I already know you're going to take the bet because you have that prideful aura, and all."

"Maybe I do, maybe I don't," Billy gave a small shrug. He was harbouring a sneaky grin that sent a shiver of uneasiness down Steve's spine. "Maybe I've been playing you long enough to learn your tells, and maybe I'm not the Neanderthal you keep making me out to be."

Steve blinked. The alcohol left a murky glaze in the front of his mind but he was doing everything he could to hide it. Billy's demeanor, while suspiciously more pleasant while they played the game, hadn't shifted much. Darla had started to dance two shots ago, wriggling her shoulders ever so slightly while she hummed a melody he couldn't quite place, but was otherwise holding her own. He didn't want to be the first one to crack.

"So you fold?"

"I could," Billy leaned forwards. His breath was coming hot and heavy. A crease formed in his brow between his eyes, which were struggling to focus, but held their resolve.

Steve followed in suit and their voices quieted down. The seconds stretched out between them, leaving the thin layer of cigarette smoke over their heads to be the loudest thing in the room.

"But, Harrington... why would I fold when I know that you're bluffing out your asshole?"

"Pretty cocky for someone who's about to need their stomach pumped."

"Pretty cocky for someone calling you on your shit." Billy grabbed the half-empty bottle of vodka and gave it a coy little shake. Amid the elongated tension in the room, the contents sloshed with a menacing



taunt. "I'll see your three shots, and then *I'm* going to raise you."

"I don't know, man..." Steve pursed his lips. "I'd love to see you try to chug the rest of the bottle but I think your girlfriend's going to be pretty pissed that she leaves us alone for two minutes and you're passed out on the ground."

"She's not my girlfriend," Billy spat a little too hastily.

Was it the elixir talking, or had the temperature in the room shifted without warning? Billy gave a half-hearted shrug and dropped his gaze, returning his attention to his cards. The edges of his lips turned down ever so slightly while his brows pulled up in narrow arches.

"No labels," he muttered, "but you're right about one thing. She's a tough one and she'd kick your ass if she felt it could be justified."

"I'll bet," Steve responded and he meant it. There wasn't an ounce of sarcasm coated on his words. Once they were out there the room fell into a stagnant hum. It was a gentle quiet that left the hazy cabin feeling untainted and tranquil. Like they weren't two men who were trying to beat the crap out of one another less than an hour ago, they were just playing the game.

Darla returned to the table and inexplicably knocked her knuckles against the tabletop a few times.

"What'd I miss?" she asked.

"Harrington decided the game needed a change of pace," Billy murmured. He wore a new smirk that sent a shiver of unease down Steve's neck but he held his ground.

Darla frowned. "I knew I should have kept my mouth shut about strip poker."

"Oh, I think you're going to approve of the new stakes. Don't you worry about that."

Steve guffawed. "Jesus, Hargrove. Do I even want to know what you're thinking?"

"You're the one letting your little sailor do your talking, just swinging it around, making reckless bets."

The commentary threw him off and Steve blinked several times in succession as if his eyelids were a hamster wheel and he needed his brain to catch up quickly. "Wait, *what?*"

Darla chuckled. "Oh, Billy, come on. I don't think he likes to play like we do."

"He's a big boy, Dar, he knows where the door is if he gets scared. Besides, I think he needs this."

"Are we going *sailing?*" Steve's eyes bulged.

They both slid questionable looks his way and Darla slowly, quietly, reached forwards and nudged Steve's glass further away from him. "Drink some water, sweetie."

He was about to argue but decided to reach for the water bottle he had been provided earlier. Hydration was nothing to be ashamed of, after all.

Billy cleared his throat. "Alright, here's what's going to happen, Harrington, and if you ever repeat what I'm about to say to anyone I will break into your home in the middle of the night and you're going to wake up to the sound of your mother's sweet moans and groans but you will find your pops fast asleep on in the living room, you feel me?"

Steve snarled. "You are a gross person."

"That's no way to talk to someone about to throw you a bone."

Steve winced. "Dude, what the hell?"

"Bad choice of words, babe..." Darla shook her head and left the table once again. Before Steve could see where she was going, Billy banged his fist lightly on the table and drew the focus back to him.

"Yeah, yeah, sorry, but whatever. You know why you're in a slump, Harrington?"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. Who said I was in a slump?"

"I did, because it's a fact. Ever since I got to this shithole town, all anyone talks about is this King Steve and why am I only just meeting him tonight? Your game is shit, at least from what I've seen, and while this place does reek of *actual shit* I find it hard to believe their best player can barely make ten points a game. I've only seen you at one party this year—which you left before midnight—and all your so-called-friends have been whispering about your disappearance. I mean, you were hanging out with a group of twelve-year-olds tonight, for Christ's sake."

"Okay, I was babysitting, and that's a whole other issue—" Steve snapped but Billy held up a hand to cut him off.

"You're letting that Nancy chick get to you, man. She's in your head. And now that you lost her, she's eating you alive and if you don't find a way to get the hell over her, then you're gonna blink and in twenty years you will still be here. Moping around town, pining over what could've been, single-handedly carrying the malt liquor business cause that'll be all you can afford. You're an alright guy, Harrington. Don't let that girl ruin your life like that."

Steve sunk in his chair. After the year they had, it was impossible to imagine his life without Nancy, but it was more than that. It was that Byers kid, and everything he'd seen, everything they had been through, all of them... Sure it brought him closer to the kids and even working alongside Hopper had helped him get through a lot of stuff. But every time he saw Nancy it was like his whole world got turned... it was like he could feel himself being pulled inside out and he knew it wasn't good for him.

She had broken him and moved on without a hitch, which meant their whole year together was a lie. He never meant anything to her, not really. It was almost impossible for him to wrap his mind around. Was he nothing more than a distraction from the horrors of Hawkins lab? If they hadn't gone through the monstrosity that was last year, would she have ever stayed with him? Did she date him out of guilt, or gratitude, or pity?

He'd been marinating in her betrayal for long enough. He knew it

was time to move on, but how? It was so hard to get the picture of her out of his mind.

"I'm gonna help you, Harrington," Billy leaned back in his chair. "I don't think you realize just how badly you need this. Do you trust me?"

Steve splayed his cards on the table. Three jacks gawked up at him with blank vengeance.

"What do you got?"

Billy's face became unreadable. His gaze flashed from Steve's cards, to his cards, to Steve's face, back to his cards.

"Well, shit," he groaned.

He didn't intend to, but Steve laughed.

"HA! *What?!* You really dug yourself a grave there, didn't you?" Steve chortled, suddenly giddy. He rocked back and forth in his chair unable to quell the giggling climbing up his throat. "So what do you got? Pair of twos? Ace high? That was a nice speech, man, but what, did I just win your car or something?"

"Not quite," Billy sighed. His eyes trailed over the back of Steve's head. "I just needed to give her a minute." He hastily revealed his hand just as Steve's were snatched and pulled behind his back.

"Full house, Stevie."

The clink of handcuffs bound his wrists together behind his back and then came the blindfold.

## 5. Chapter 5

The world went dark. The sound of pumping blood beat heavily in Steve's ears, throbbing louder than his laboured breathing. His gut churned upside down. He was dragged to his feet and, thanks to the liquor, the floor felt like it was slipping away from him. He swayed to the side and then he was leaning back against a woman's chest.

"Shh, shh," Darla's voice was low and tender in his ear. He knew those murmurs were meant to reassure him but now all he could think about was being left in the ocean at midnight. Darkness all around him, drifting along in the waves, unable to catch his breath...

"Don't coddle him." This voice was husky, right next to his other ear. Billy's words laid hot on his cheek. Two large hands pressed flat against his chest and slid down his body slowly, raising the hairs on his arms.

Steve pressed his lips together. He needed to remain calm. They weren't going to hurt him... Well, maybe they were. But he could take it. He had to... if he started crying in front of Billy now there was no way in Hell he could show his face around town. He jiggled his wrists. The metal was cold and the bands were too tight, plucking away at the invisible fuzzy hairs. He tried to find a clasp to release his hands, but surprisingly there wasn't one. These cuffs didn't come from any sort of toy-store police kit.

"Got his arms?"

"Mhmm."

"Good."

Billy's hands on his torso dipped down and wound behind his legs. He was hoisted up by the knees in a second and he let out an impulsive yelp. Darla had a wicked strong grip on his arms. They were carrying him around the cabin, which only made the dizziness worse.

Suddenly he was flung to the side. He braced for the impact of the hardwood floor or even the cold dirt outside if they were going to

toss him in the yard and let the fire ants feast, but instead there was the creaky give of the box spring mattress. He yelped again and tried to keep from getting sick from all the movement.

Someone jumped onto the bed next to him and rolled him onto his back. His arms remained trapped underneath him and his legs were dragged to the corner of the bed, his ankles left dangling off the side. Darla's fingers trailed along his neck, under his jaw, and wound their way up through his hair. The sensations made him shiver.

He moved to sit up, but her hands turned into cinderblocks and pressed down hard on his shoulders.

Billy was rummaging around through drawers. There was a lot of shuffling of papers and books until he coyly proclaimed '*Aha!*' and rejoined the two on the bed.

*Shwick...* the scratchy sound made Steve's heart skip a beat. It was too familiar. Anyone who had ever encountered Billy knew that he smoked like a chimney and he always had that damned lighter with him.

"What are you doing?" he exclaimed, frightened.

Billy let out a throaty chuckle and straddled his knees. "Scared?"

He couldn't move. "Let me go."

"Nah."

"What are you doing?!"

Darla giggled too close to his face. Her hands continued to roam, and they played with the collar of his shirt, letting her digits casually slip under the fabric every now and then. Her touch made his toes curl. Billy laid his hand down flat with his palm pressed on Steve's stomach. He gave it a light pat and cooed, "Relax... you're okay..."

The reassurance had the opposite affect.

Without warning, Billy grabbed the fabric of his shirt and yanked it up. He pulled the hemline up and over Steve's head, revealing his

upper body altogether, and somehow the room got even darker.

Darla's hands roamed lower. She dragged her fingernails along his chest and began to circle and brush his nipples, making him catch his breath.

Billy removed Steve's belt and tossed it across the room and undid his jeans, but he didn't slide them off. He tugged them down a few inches, with rough movements, and then feather-brushed his thick fingers over Steve's waistline.

He gulped. This time it came out like a whisper, "Wh-what are you doing?"

"Waiting."

He was almost too scared to ask. "For what?"

"Tell me, Harrington... have you ever felt this with that girl?"

"Felt what?"

Billy chuckled. "Scared. Alive. Aroused..." his fingers, so impossibly delicate, slid beneath his boxers.

Steve pressed his lips together. Everything in his body stiffened, especially below the belt. Billy smirked at the discovery.

Darla was leaning over him. The tips of her hair danced across his chest and although there was a panic welling inside him, Steve realized he wasn't scared. At least not as scared as he should be. He tried to blame the liquor, but there was a quiet voice inside him telling him that these two people weren't out for his blood. Maybe, just maybe, they were trying to help him get over Nancy.

In their own... strange... way.

It was silent and relatively still for a few seconds. It wasn't too long, but it was enough time for Steve to realize that they were conversing, silently. Then they switched positions. Billy hopped off of his lap and Darla swung one leg over, throwing all of her weight on his thighs.

"How you doing, Stevie?" Darla murmured. She grabbed at his crotch and giggled softly at the surprised moan that came out of him. "Oh, good."

Billy returned to the bed and took up residence by Steve's head. He leaned over, close enough so that his musky scent was still detectable. "You're going to thank me for this, man."

He was rubbing something squishy between his hands. Before he could ask what, two warm, wet palms splashed onto his stomach and started to rub in firm circles. Oil. It was warm and slick to the touch and Steve grit his teeth together. He gave his nipples a teasing pinch as he worked his way up his chest. He didn't stop massaging until every inch of Steve's exposed skin was slathered.

Billy cleared his throat and his hands left Steve's body. "Wait, hold it up a bit higher."

"Here?" asked Darla.

"Yeah, that should be good."

"Wait, what... What's good?"

Something tiny and scorching fell onto the center of Steve's stomach. He yelped and tried to coil in on himself, but the two held him down. Billy clamped a slightly slimy hand over his mouth and now his warm lips were right next to Steve's ear. "Stay still, dude."

Another boiling droplet fell a few seconds later, just as the slight sting from the first one began to subside. This one fell lower. It landed just below Steve's belly button and he growled from behind Billy's hand. The realization washed over him and he could feel the beads of nervous sweat building up around his neck.

Candle wax.